

PRESERVATION OF HISTORIC BUILDINGS IN JAPAN: Principles and practices in an international perspective

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«Respect for cultural diversity» is today the slogan among the cultural property preservation specialists involved with world cultural heritage (UNESCO) and ICOMOS.¹ This was confirmed by 45 of the leading experts in the field of preservation of cultural properties who for six days in November 1994, met in Nara, Japan. They represented international organizations and 26 countries from around the world. Their goal was to clarify the application of «the test of authenticity» to World Heritage nominations by revising and extending the definition of the various aspects of authenticity now noted in the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*. The conference was a collective effort which was initiated by ICOMOS at the request of the World Heritage Committee and supported by Japan's Agency for Cultural Affairs and Nara Foundation, UNESCO (World Heritage Centre), ICCROM and the Canadian and the Norwegian governments. Japan is today firmly integrated into the international preservation community: the Japanese National Committee of ICOMOS was established in 1980 and the Japanese government ratified UNESCO's «World Heritage Convention» in 1992.

Because Japan's marvelous architectural heritage primarily is made of wood, the Japanese approaches to the preservation and restoration of historic buildings have alien to most European experts whose experience is based on buildings made of stone or brick, and plaster-work. Many Western experts have erroneously interpreted the vicennial cycle of reconstruction at Ise Shrine as Japan's approach to restoration.² However, the reconstruction of the buildings of Ise Shrine every twenty years is not considered as architectural preservation in Japan. The interpretation of the example of Ise as representative of the Japanese attitude to historic buildings, implies that the Japanese do not care about conserving ancient materials in a historic building. A look at Japanese architectural history, and not to forget Japan's ancient literature, will show that the Japanese through their history indeed have appreciated ancient objects and buildings for their patina, and treasured them just because of their ancient materials. The vicennial cycle of reconstruction at Ise Shrine is, and cannot be interpreted in any other way than as a religious event.

During the last few years more and more Western experts have come to recognize the sophisticated Japanese approach to the preservation and restoration of historic buildings. This has led to the need to fine-tune the international instruments which influence the preservation experts' way of thinking around the world. It was therefore significant that Japan hosted the

Nara Conference of Authenticity in Relation to the World Heritage Convention in November 1994. Japan thus contributed practically to resolve a central world heritage issue by organizing the Conference. Also, Japan's own principles and practices in preservation showed the foreign experts the necessity to consider the approaches to preservation with respect for the cultural traditions these approaches are based on.

Present international preservation philosophy, in particular the *International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites* (the «Venice Charter») of 1964, is based upon the assumption that cultural properties — in spite of national and political differences — belong to all mankind. From this it follows that they should be preserved on the basis of the best knowledge available as measured by the accepted standards of international research and understanding. Subsequently, the validity of this logic has continuously been questioned. However, during its general assembly in 1990, ICOMOS confirmed that the Venice Charter, in spite of its possible shortcomings, was still valid as the international norm for preservation work. The perception of the universal value of cultural properties is also part of the theoretical foundation of UNESCO's World Heritage Convention. Japan's recent ratification of the World Heritage Convention has led to increased international interest in Japanese preservation work. Japan is responding to the foreign interest in several ways; the most important so far was the organization of the Nara Conference.

The concept of «authenticity» is central to the World Heritage Convention because cultural properties which are nominated for the «World Heritage List» must meet *the test of authenticity in design, materials, workmanship, or setting*.³ Although the etymology of «authenticity» is quite straightforward — the word derives from the Greek term *authentikós* («genuine») — the universal application of the concept is problematic. For the Japanese preservation experts, the concept of authenticity is problematic to apply, first of all, because the Japanese language has no equivalent term.⁴ However, there are also aspects of Japanese preservation work which are questionable in the opinion of many Western preservation experts. In particular, they criticize the Japanese inclination to «restoration» — the process of making changes to a historic building so that it will closely approximate its state at a specific period.⁵

A major tenet in Japanese preservation thinking since 1897, when the government enacted the country's first law for the protection of cultural properties, has been to consider the original state of a historic building, or the most significant stage in its development, as the ideal aim for the restoration of that building. Consequently, structural or other members which have been added to a historic building during its life-time, are considered to be of lesser importance compared to original material. This view is fundamentally incompatible with international preservation standards which emphasize that the evaluation of the authenticity of a historic building does not limit consideration to original form and structure, but includes all subsequent modifications and additions over time, which in themselves possess artistic or historic value. Therefore, it is not the original formal concept which is regarded as authentic, but the building as it has been handed down to us through history, with

all its modifications and additions due to repair necessitated by decay of the structure and its materials, and by modifications for functional or aesthetic reasons. The building should, if structurally and functionally possible, be preserved as it is. The identity of the building is related to the substance acquired through its history.

Even if the Japanese in their preservation work pay more respect to original materials and the original design compared to the existing state of the historic building, it would be erroneous to draw the conclusion that Japanese preservation thinking is based on outdated ideas. There are natural as well as cultural reasons that fully justify the Japanese approach. The central issue here is the still practiced tradition of dismantling-repairing in Japan, which, from a foreign observer's viewpoint, may impair the authenticity of the historic building. However, in Japan the dismantling of buildings in order to repair them is inevitable for structural reasons. Moreover, the periodical repair and remodeling of buildings is a tradition going back to the ninth century in Japan. In other wood-building countries or regions, like in China, England, or Scandinavia, the tradition for dismantling-repairing does not exist.

Today, Japanese experts claim that the philosophy of restoring a building to its original state expresses appreciation of the contribution of the original master carpenter, as a consequence, it is important to use the same tools and similar techniques of craftsmanship as the original master carpenter. Therefore, restoration work in Japan during the last decades has been accompanied by the revival of tools and techniques of craftsmanship that have been left behind by later technological development. This has led to a recognition of the importance of preserving not only buildings, but also the techniques which were used to construct them.

Although experts everywhere recognize that the success of preservation is entirely dependent on craftsmen and artisans skilled in traditional techniques, the Japanese stand alone in taking legal measures to protect historic techniques, and in officially recognizing the persons who possess knowledge of them. In 1975 a new chapter dealing with «Protection of Traditional Techniques for Conservation of Cultural Properties» was added to Japanese preservation legislation. This provision is related to the notion of intangible cultural properties and the designation of «Living National Treasures» (*Ningen kokuhô*): it is not only objects as such that are worth preserving, but also the knowledge and methods which were used to produce them, and which are crucial for their preservation.

The Japanese recognize that the traditional techniques are indispensable for the preservation of the historic structures, and conversely, that traditional techniques are being preserved through actual preservation work. This recognition of the mutually-dependent relationship between the preservation of buildings and the preservation of historic techniques may be understood in relation to a basic feature in Japanese thought which Shuntarô Itô has termed «Non-substantiality or Process-oriented-ness».⁶ With reference to Japanese thinkers from the 18th to the 20th centuries, Professor Itô points out that the Japanese *view the world not as consisting of unchangeable substances but as a "flow" or "process" of constant change. Dynamic changes form the foundation of the world, where "relation" is preeminent over substance. Primacy of process in relation is the rule.* The emphasis in Japanese thinking on processes and relations and

not *substance that exist per se, unchanged and unrelated to others*, may explain why the Japanese have come to recognize the mutually-dependent relationship between the preservation of historic buildings and the preservation of historic techniques. As a consequence, the Japanese have taken a leading position in the world concerning systematic studies and the use of historic materials and techniques in preservation work. As the Japanese understanding of the relationship between people and historic buildings in preservation work has deep cultural roots, it may be difficult to emulate the Japanese practices by foreigners. Still, the Japanese efforts to preserve the knowledge of historic design principles and techniques of craftsmanship as an integral part of architectural preservation represent universal ideals, according to Article 10 of the Venice Charter.

The two central points of interest in Japanese preservation work for the foreign experts are the issues of authenticity and whether Japan conforms to international norms, and, secondly, to what extent the Japanese practices devoted to the transfer of knowledge of historic techniques of craftsmanship to future generations may be adopted by other countries. To analyze both issues, it is necessary to go beyond the bare theories of preservation. However, the international preservationist community has so far only drawn on the resources of specialists within the social sciences and the humanities to a limited extent. The understanding of the problems which arise from 1) the application of presumed universal principles to local and regional needs and 2) the possible transfer of particular concepts and notions in the preservation work of one country to other cultural contexts, is therefore superficial.

The logic inherent in the Japanese timber buildings, and the necessity of on-going repair by dismantling, call for a different approach to that of the preservation of timber buildings in other regions. Even though some aspects of the Japanese approach to architectural preservation may seem alien to the Western observers, this ought not lead them to base their criticism on their own experience alone. As the main purpose of architectural preservation is to sustain the cultural identity of a country and thereby enrich the culture of man, we are obliged to accept diverse cultural expressions in architectural preservation. Only then can we draw lessons from another country's experiences in order to improve the protection and the preservation of the architectural heritage at home.

The Nara conference on authenticity in November 1994 adopted a document (the «Nara Document on Authenticity») which reflects the fact that international preservation doctrine has moved from a eurocentric approach to a post-modern position characterized by recognition of cultural relativism. This is not to say that international debate on the authenticity of cultural heritage is without meaning after the Nara Document. In this situation, preservation experts are forced to clarify the use of the concept of authenticity within their own countries and cultural spheres. Only then can they encounter their colleagues from other parts of the world in an open dialogue in the understanding that the search for authenticity is universal, but recognizing that the ways and means to preserve the authenticity of cultural heritage are culturally dependent.

Notes

- 1 See *Convention concerning the protection of the world cultural and natural heritage* (the «World Heritage Convention»); adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO at its seventeenth session, Paris, 16 November 1972. As of 1st November 1994, 139 states parties had ratified the World Heritage Convention which therefore is the world's most universal legal instrument in the field of preservation and conservation of cultural properties.

ICOMOS — *International Council on Monuments and Sites* — is a non-governmental professional organization with its headquarter in Paris, France. ICOMOS aims to bring together preservation specialists from all over the world and serve as a forum for professional dialogue and exchange. The Executive Committee is the managing body of ICOMOS together with the Bureau. The members of these bodies are elected every three years at the general assembly of the 65 national committees and 16 international specialized committees. According to Article 11 of the World Heritage Convention, ICOMOS has the duty to offer the organization's advice to the Director General of UNESCO concerning cultural World Heritage.
- 2 This is evident from a recent analysis of the World Heritage Convention by Léon Pressouyre and from Raymond Lemaire's paper presented to the preparatory workshop for the Nara Conference; see Pressouyre, L. [1993] *La Convention du Patrimoine mondial, vingt ans après*. Paris: Editions UNESCO. See p. 12.

Lemaire, R. [1994] Authenticité et patrimoine mondial. In Larsen, K. E. and N. Marstein (editors):
Conference on Authenticity in Relation to the World Heritage Convention: Preparatory Workshop; Bergen, Norway, 31 January — 2 February 1992. Trondheim: Tapir publishers. See pp. 88-90.
- 3 Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World heritage Convention. Article 24. b. i.
- 4 The terms *shin-sei-sei* (kanji), *shin-jitsu-sei* (kanji), or *hon-ma-mono* (kanji), have not been used in Japan to describe this essential quality of historic buildings.
- 5 For information on general theories of preservation and principles and practices in Japanese preservation, please see:

Larsen, K. E. [1994] *Architectural Preservation in Japan*. Trondheim: Tapir Publishers.
- 6 Itô, S. [1994] University in Japanese Thought. *The Japan Foundation Newsletter*, vol. 21, no. 6, Quotations from pp. 8 and 16.